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State Fish and Game Lt. Mike Stefanak, who supervises most of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said that his agency is still conducting interviews this week to determine whether the hunter had a legal bear hunting license.

A person could have killed the bear legally with a permit during bear hunting season, but selling bear paws is a felony, Stefanak said. The paws are used in some Asian food and bear claws can be made into jewelry. Investigators have found no evidence the bear was poached or that the paws were for sale.

However, he added: "One of the things that leads us to thinking this could be illegal is you don't typically find someone cutting paws off and keeping them."

The bear paw case led the Humane Society of the United States to offer a \$2,500 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction, if it's determined the bear was illegally killed.

The case comes at a time when attention to bear poaching is growing, specifically for bears killed to collect the bile from their gall bladders, an ingredient in traditional Asian medicine.

A federal bill introduced in March would strike down laws in some states that allow bear parts to be sold. Recent undercover investigations by a wildlife group found bear products at traditional

Chinese medicine shops across the United States.

Some wildlife groups and experts believe more California bears are being killed illegally as their numbers increases. Fish and game wardens don't believe poaching is a growing problem but say their enforcement powers are limited because of the declining number of game wardens.

Using Bear Parts

Residents at a home on Clifton Avenue in Riverside, just north of Riverside Municipal Airport, opened their door May 3 and found the bear paws, Riverside police spokesman Steven Frasher said.

A man at the home initially threw away the paws, but a neighbor, fearing it might be an animal cruelty case, later called police, Frasher said. Residents at the home said a former roommate was a hunter and was there earlier in the week saying he killed a bear, Frasher said. The hunter did not mention the bear paws.

Police handed over the paws to Riverside County Animal Control, who are keeping them in storage facility.

Police turned the investigation over to fish and game wardens. They say bear paws are used in bear paw soup, considered a delicacy in some Asian countries.

Traditional Asian medicine has been around 3,000 years and gained popularity in the United States the past 30 years, said Lixin Huang, president of the American College of Traditional

Chinese Medicine in San Francisco.

It stresses healing through natural elements -- such as animal parts, plants and minerals -- rather than chemicals, Huang said.

The bear gall bladder bile is used to treat a variety of ailments, ranging from inflammation to fever.

Undercover Investigations

The World Society for the Protection of Animals, a Boston-based nonprofit animal welfare organization, has conducted two undercover investigations of the bear bile trade in the United States.

A 2000-01 investigation found 91 percent of traditional Asian medicine shops sold bear parts or products from bears.

That number dropped to 15 percent of 130 shops surveyed in eight cities in 2006. The gall bladder at a Los Angeles shop was being sold for \$2,800, the most expensive of any found in the investigation.

Dena Jones, program manager for the organization, attributed the decline to outreach by organizations such as hers, which are promoting herbal alternatives to bear gall bladder bile.

She also believes the industry may be moving underground.

The organization is lobbying for passage of the Bear Protection Act, which would prohibit the sale of bear parts nationwide. Currently, 34 states ban the sale of bear parts out of the state and 41 states ban the sale within the state, Jones said.

California bans the sale inside and outside the state, Jones said. It's punishable by up to a year in prison and a \$10,000 fine. John Campbell, R-Irvine, is a co-sponsor of the bill.

More Bears

In California, the black bear population is estimated at 30,000 to 35,000 black bears, said Doug Updike, the state bear coordinator for fish and game. That's up from 8,000 to 10,000 in the early 1980s, he said.

The population increase can be traced to a change in the early 1980s that restricted the use of dogs when hunting bears, Updike said. Hunters frequently used dogs to chase bears until they climbed a tree, making the kill easier, he said.

Updike estimated that 5 percent of the state's bears are south of the Tehachapi Mountains, but said they are increasingly being spotted south of Interstate 10.

An estimated 10,000 bears die each year in California, Updike said. About 1,700 are hunted

legally and 300 to 400, or 3 to 4 percent, are killed illegally, he estimated. In the early 1980s, he estimated 30 to 40 percent of bears were killed illegally.

Pursuing poaching investigations and other fish and game related crimes is "very problematic" because of the declining number of game wardens, said Jerry Karnow, a game warden and legislative liaison for the California Fish and Game Wardens Association.

The number of game wardens peaked in 1999 at 280. Today, there are 192. A study found California has the fewest number of wardens per capita.

Some disagree with fish and game officials and believe more bears are being killed illegally.

Glenn Stewart, a Cal Poly Pomona biology professor who has studied bears in the Southern California, said there are 600 to 800 bears in the San Bernardino Mountains and about 400 in the San Gabriel Mountains.

He believes illegal hunting of bears has increased in Southern California because there are more bears in the local mountains and fewer in Asia.

"Wherever the bears are available, they're going to be going after them," Stewart said.

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